



This weekend's Cleveland Orchestra presentation can be heard live on Saturday, May 28, beginning at 8:00 p.m. and on Sunday, July 3, and Sunday, September 25, beginning at 4:00 p.m. as part of the Orchestra's local radio broadcast series on WCLV (104.9 FM) or on [www.wclv.com](http://www.wclv.com).

# *Missa Solemnis*, Op. 123

begun in 1819 and completed in 1823

by **Ludwig van Beethoven**

born in Bonn on December 16, 1770

died in Vienna on March 26, 1827

*The Missa Solemnis was first performed in St. Petersburg in 1824, thanks to Beethoven's Russian patron Prince Galitzin. The first Cleveland Orchestra performance was in 1956, conducted by Robert Shaw; the work was also heard in 1963 (Shaw), 1967 (George Szell), 1973 and 1981 (both times conducted by Lorin Maazel).*

*This work is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, organ, and strings, plus chorus and four vocal soloists.*

*The unusual instrument in the orchestration list is the organ, which Beethoven added in case the work should be performed in church. The most notable instrumental moments come from a solo flute, which seems to represent the Holy Spirit in the Credo, and a solo violin, which does the same thing in the Benedictus. But the piece also offers Beethoven's most extensive and elaborate writing for trombones, which add an extra note of grandeur and solemnity.*

**FRANZ WELSER-MÖST**, MUSIC DIRECTOR of The Cleveland Orchestra, fell in love with Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* when he was in his teens. He bought, he says, nine recordings of it, and listened to all of them. This surely is unusual, because the *Missa Solemnis* — or “solemn mass” — isn't very often heard. It's one of Beethoven's last and very largest works, and may have been the piece he cared the most about. But it's also very individual, very difficult to play and sing, and also very humbling; parts of it, while overpowering, can also seem profoundly simple. Before this week, The Cleveland Orchestra has only programmed it five times, in all its history. Until these present performances, many of the musicians had never played it; some had never heard it. For Welser-Möst, it was exhausting to rehearse. The piece, he told the Orchestra at one rehearsal, is “one of the biggest philosophical statements in music history.” Every moment has a meaning, and should be played in a way that makes that meaning come alive.

But what would Beethoven's philosophical statement be? In many ways, the

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*Missa Solemnis* seems contradictory. To begin with, it's a formal setting of the Catholic mass. But Beethoven, even if he was born a Catholic, never practiced his religion, and was even hostile to the church, which he found repressive. His friend Anton Schindler said he'd sometimes stop priests on the street or in the countryside, and harangue them about the true meaning of religion. Which isn't to say that Beethoven wasn't religious. His faith ran very deep, but also was unorthodox. It even had what today we'd call a New Age tinge; Beethoven read books about Egypt, and kept on his desk an inscription found in an Egyptian temple:

**I AM THAT WHICH IS.  
I AM ALL, WHAT IS, WHAT WAS, WHAT WILL BE:  
NO MORTAL MAN HAS EVER LIFTED MY VEIL.**

Why did he write a Catholic mass? In part, no doubt, because it was something that composers in Vienna often did, including Beethoven's great predecessors, Haydn and Mozart. Welser-Möst, an Austrian Catholic himself, feels close to this: "I grew up with Catholic church music. Haydn, Schubert, and Mozart masses, and some older music as well."

But Beethoven also had another, much more worldly reason. In 1819, one of his pupils and most loyal patrons, the Archduke Rudolph, an Austrian prince, was named an archbishop. Beethoven, who was always hatching schemes — usually unwise ones — to advance his career, proposed that he should write a "High Mass" (as he called it), to be performed at Rudolph's installation ceremony. But this made no sense; there wasn't time enough to finish any piece as big as that.

**In the *Missa Solemnis*, somehow, after huge and painful struggle, Beethoven brought his own unique religion back to the Catholicism of his birth, writing music that seems both deep and effortless.**

And yet Beethoven composed it anyway. He worked on it for five long years, from 1819 through 1823, years in which he was often sick, and grew increasingly eccentric. One of his closest friends, Nanette Streicher, wrote that "as a beggar he was so dirty in his dress, and in manner like a bear . . . he laughed like no one else, it was a scream, he would call people names as he passed them . . ."  
" Children laughed at him in the street;

once he was arrested by the Viennese police, who saw him staring into windows, and thought he was a tramp.

But still he worked. For a while he seemed to hope that Rudolph would give him a job, putting him in charge of all the music in his archdiocesan church. But that, too, was crazy. Beethoven — impractical, unkempt, and unable to follow anybody's lead but his own — would never have been given any post like that.

And still he worked on the *Missa Solemnis*, even when his eyes began to hurt,

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and his doctor told him that he shouldn't read or write. At the beginning of the score, he scrawled, with halting punctuation, "From the heart — may it — reach the heart." More formally, he directed that the piece begin *Mit Andacht*, "with devotion."

The score unfolds with simple radiance, the soloists in dialogue with the chorus. This is the beginning of the Catholic mass, the *Kyrie eleison*. For Welser-Möst, "The music is just there. It even doesn't have a real pulse. This is about timelessness." Somehow, after huge and painful struggle, Beethoven brought his own unique religion back to the Catholicism of his birth, writing music that seems both deep and effortless.

The second movement of the mass, the *Gloria*, does something else. It's rhythmic and joyful, full of earthly energy.

But that's only how it starts. While the *Kyrie* has very few words, repeated many times, the *Gloria* has many words. To express their many meanings, Beethoven makes his music change direction, often without even any hint of a transition. "Gloria in excelsis Deo!" shouts the chorus, with bright and shining trumpets, "Glory to God in the highest!" Then all at once the sound grows hushed. "Et in terra pax," murmur the basses, "And on earth, peace." Quietly the rest of the chorus joins in, "And on earth, peace to all who show goodwill."

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These changes in texture and tone — this is just the first of them — make the music very rich, and often quite surprising. You can follow the text as you listen, if you like, so you'll know everything that Beethoven wants to express. But these changes in the music are also one reason why the *Missa Solemnis* is so hard to perform. For Welser-Möst, "there's nothing easy in this piece. The hard part is getting an arch over all of it. All of a sudden Beethoven has so many moments, and one is 15 minutes long and one is 20 seconds. It's hard to get all of it under one big arch. And the other hard part is to capture the idea. The idea and spirit of the piece, so it doesn't become a technical exercise of enormous difficulty."

The *Gloria* ends with a tremendous fugue, the many voices in the chorus rolling over one another, in a style that Beethoven deliberately took from older music. As Welser-Möst says, "Beethoven tried to sum up all the church music of the previous 300 years, and combined it with his ideology of peace and freedom."

The next movement, the *Credo*, again starts simply, but very firmly. "Credo," sings the chorus. "Credo, credo": "I believe, I believe, I believe." In rehearsal, Welser-Möst said this music speaks of "standing firm in your faith" — a faith so utterly secure, the music seems to say, that nobody could ever doubt it.

But the central section of the *Credo* is a drama — the incarnation of Christ,

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his crucifixion, and his resurrection. This begins in the deepest hush (at the words “et incarnatus est”), with a passage inspired by what Beethoven thought was the purest church music ever written, the music of the Renaissance, or perhaps by something even earlier, Gregorian chant. “Here you put on your monk dress,” Welser-Möst told the chorus and the Orchestra. “You have an image of a Gothic cathedral.” But still there’s something that’s more modern, even more theatrical, a flute hovering high above, unmistakably symbolizing the Holy Spirit.

Then, in yet another of Beethoven’s unexpected changes, the mass turns human. “Et!” cries the tenor soloist, his voice ringing out. “Et homo factus est!” “And He was made man!” In the section just before, Christ’s divinity seemed rapt and magical. But now the music seems to say that His humanity should matter more. This surely isn’t Catholic doctrine, and later on, again asserting his religious independence, Beethoven buries a portion of the mass that he surely disagreed with. This is the part about the primacy of the Catholic church. The words are in his score, but they pass so quickly that they almost can’t be heard.

What Beethoven does stress, in yet another giant fugue, is the promise of eternal life. But the fugue was hard for him to write. Schindler, his close friend, came to see him in the middle of his work on it, and found him “singing, yelling, stamping his feet.” Welser-Möst thinks the very gentle beginning of the fugue

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(at the words “et vitam venturi”) sounds “like a question mark,” as if Beethoven at first isn’t sure that life will really be eternal. This, Welser-Möst says, is his favorite moment in the piece, though soon the fugue gains confidence, and the *Credo* ends with shouts of joy.

Now the mass approaches its ending. The fourth movement, the *Sanctus*, starts like a murmured prayer, then explodes into glory. But this only prepares the way for the most solemn moment in the work, the

orchestral prelude to the *Benedictus*, in which Beethoven, perhaps unexpectedly, returns to his childhood faith, and becomes entirely Catholic. Welser-Möst told the Orchestra that this is music for the transubstantiation, the moment when bread and wine become the body and the blood of Christ. He wants it played without overt expression, but with a sense of mystery. The Holy Spirit once again appears, this time as a solo violin, playing very high. The singers start the *Benedictus*. Their melody is simple, and Beethoven prolongs it, the violin always soaring high above. Music in heaven might sound like this.

And now we reach the final movement, the *Agnus Dei* and the *Dona Nobis Pacem*, with words that say “Lamb of God, have mercy on us,” and then “Grant us

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# Beethoven Frustrated



*Henriette Sontag, the soprano soloist for the world premiere of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 1824.*

Beethoven never heard the complete *Missa Solemnis*. A passionate Russian supporter, Prince Galitzin, premiered the piece in St. Petersburg in 1824, the year after Beethoven finished it. But Beethoven wasn't there. All he ever heard from the work was the *Kyrie*, *Credo*, and *Agnus Dei*, which he conducted, also in 1824, at a concert in Vienna. This must have been a monster event, because it also featured the world premiere of the Ninth Symphony. That's a lot of heavy music for a single concert.

But to say Beethoven "heard" these pieces is — very sadly — not quite accurate. It's well known in Beethoven lore that he was too deaf to hear the audience applauding him. The contralto soloist, Caroline Unger, "had the presence of mind," as Beethoven's close friend Anton Schindler wrote, to turn Beethoven around and "show him the cheering crowd throwing their hats into the air and waving their handkerchiefs."

That, however, was the least of it. During rehearsals, Unger — along with the soprano soloist, Henriette Sontag, and even the chorusmaster — begged Beethoven to change some of the difficult vocal music in both the *Missa* and the symphony. Nobody would change a note in Beethoven today, but as Unger and Sontag saw it, their request was completely reasonable. Normally they sang Italian opera, and, in those days, opera singers changed anything they didn't like in their parts, usually with the composers' blessings.

Beethoven, as anyone who knew him could have predicted, wasn't so accommodating. But in the end, as Schindler explains, he was too deaf to know the difference:

When the master would make none of the revisions [the singers] asked, storm clouds gathered and Caroline Unger was bold enough to tell the master to his face that he was a tyrant over all vocal cords. Beethoven replied, smiling, that both singers had been spoiled by Italian music which accounted for their present difficulties. "But these high notes here," rejoined Fräulein Sontag, "couldn't they be changed?" "And how about this place" chimed in Fräulein Unger. "It is too high for my contralto voice. Couldn't you change it?" No! no! and no again!

Similar complaints were loudly voiced during the rehearsals of the chorus. The chorus director pleaded for certain simplifica-

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## Beethoven Frustrated

tions, especially in the soprano part . . . protesting that none of his sopranos could reach high B flat. [His plea was] in vain; the master would countenance no alteration of the score.

The result of this obstinacy was that the soloists and members of the chorus made their own simplifications: when they could not reach the high notes as written, the sopranos simply did not sing. And in any case, the composer, though he was standing in the midst of the ensemble, could hear nothing of what went on!

—Greg Sandow



*This is one of the passages that the Vienna chorusmaster asked Beethoven to change. Arrows indicate the high B flats, notes that can be too high for many chorus sopranos to sing. Notice that there isn't just one of them, but — poor sopranos! — several in a row. There are three moments like this in the Credo alone, and others elsewhere in the Missa Solemnis.*

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Severance Hall

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Don Carlo	Marcus Haddock, <i>tenor</i>
Rodrigo	Simon Keenlyside, <i>baritone</i>
Elisabeth	Miriam Gaudi, <i>soprano</i>
Princess Eboli	Yvonne Naef, <i>mezzo-soprano</i>
The Grand Inquisitor	Hao Jiang Tian, <i>bass</i>
Tebaldo	Rebecca Ringle, <i>mezzo-soprano</i>
Count of Lerma	Joseph Holmes, <i>tenor</i>
An Old Monk	Eric Owens, <i>bass</i>
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with the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, Robert Porco, *director*

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peace.” We’re not in heaven any more; we’re back on earth. The prayer for mercy is dramatic; certainly it’s painful. When the “*Dona nobis pacem*” starts, Beethoven relaxes into something that’s almost like a dance, and in fact, as Welser-Möst explains, there really was dancing in the early church, and Beethoven knew that. “He puts a big smile on this music,” Welser-Möst tells the Orchestra, and asks them to play “with enormous lightness.”

**But the prayer for peace isn’t easily answered. Anxiety surges in the music. The alto and tenor soloists beg for God’s mercy. At this point, the *Missa Solemnis* isn’t church music; it could almost be opera. Some people in the 19th century were horrified; Schindler even thought that the passage should be cut!**

But the prayer for peace isn’t easily answered. Anxiety surges in the music. We hear drums and trumpets, representing, quite literally, the opposite of peace — war. The alto and tenor soloists beg for God’s mercy. At this point, the *Missa Solemnis* isn’t church music; it could almost be opera. Some people in the 19th century were horrified; Schindler even thought

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But nowhere in the piece is Beethoven’s philosophy more clear. “All his ideas about humanism he put there,” Welser-Möst says. “We have to struggle before we find inner peace.” The struggle breaks forth in an intense instrumental interlude, something “wild and crazy, the climax of intensity of the entire work.” This, Welser-Möst says, is the most difficult part of the *Missa Solemnis*: “To find the flow through all these interruptions is not easy.” But dance-like ease returns again, “and when it works right, it leads you back into simplicity.” This brings a joyful ending. “It would be great,” Welser-Möst told the Orchestra, “if you could play it with enormous joy—and also with enormous calm.”

—Greg Sandow

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